

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / DAVID L. RYAN

Plymouth Lighthouse, or Gurnet Light, the oldest surviving wooden lighthouse in the nation, sits on a bluff that is eroding at a rate of about 12 inches a year. Ruins of Fort Andrew are still visible on the site.

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Commander GEOFF ABBOTT, USCG

Coast Guard puts off move of Gurnet Light

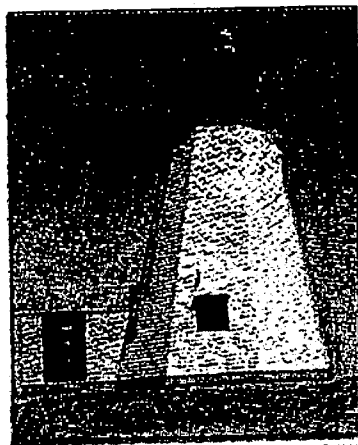
By Jeff McLaughlin
GLOBE STAFF

PLYMOUTH - The prudent mariner is one who has a carefully thought-out plan for anything and everything that might go wrong at sea - and when faced, even so, with something unforeseen, also has a plan for quickly changing course.

The Coast Guard last week upheld the prudent mariner tradition when it gave way to determined local opposition and decided not to press ahead this fall with its plan to move historic Plymouth Lighthouse 150 feet away from the eroding bluff at Gurnet Point, where a beacon has stood to mark the entrance to Plymouth Bay since 1768.

The wooden lighthouse, known locally as Gurnet Light, likely will be moved at some point - shortage of time and money make alternatives less likely - but a move won't happen on the schedule announced in June. The Coast Guard made the announcement Monday night, in a brief appearance before the Plymouth Conservation Commission to withdraw its application for the project.

The appearance at Town Hall followed an impromptu two-hour meeting in the kitchen of a Gurnet house earlier Monday at which Coast Guard officials heard the residents' concerns -



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / DAVID L. RYAN
Plymouth Lighthouse

■ LIGHTHOUSE

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mostly environmental and historical in nature - and decided to change course.

"We have met with the local residents and want to work to find a mutually agreeable solution," said Claudio Polselli, the engineer in charge of the project for the Coast Guard. "We will return at some future date," Polselli told the Conservation Commission.

Commander Geoff Abbott, who directs the Coast Guard's Rhode Island-based civil engineering unit, discussed the decision outside the meeting room. "This is not a usual process," Abbott said. "There are some issues we had not taken into account. But we'll work it out. We want to make it a team effort with the local residents. And we want to do what's right."

Abbott said the Coast Guard would look at other possible move sites, take into account locations of septic systems that might be affected by a move, involve the state's historic preservation officials in considerations about the Revolutionary War-era fort on the bluff-edge site, and help local residents explore sources of funding for various options.

"We have constraints, financial and operational and so forth," said Abbott. "But we will do whatever we can" to reach a satisfactory outcome.

Inga Hanks, the Gurnet resident whose letter to the Coast Guard's top brass prompted the pivotal meeting in the kitchen of Carver resident Mike Pinto's Gurnet summer house, said, "We are all very, very thankful to the Coast Guard. They were willing to listen, and they listened well. Instead of stubborn insistence, they showed tremendous flexibility."

Elaine Nudd, who has lived year-round on the Gurnet for 18 years, said, "I think the Coast Guard's coming out was the key. Commander Abbott had never physically inspected the site before, and when you see our 10-foot roads and the small lots with wells and septic systems so carefully placed, the plantings we've maintained to help with erosion ... well, they saw the environmental problems needed more study. They couldn't have been more cooperative."

Erosion at the Gurnet headland below the light has averaged about 12 inches a year historically, but since the Blizzard of 1978 the pace has quickened, residents said. The "No-Name Northeaster" of 1991 also brought the light closer to the bluff edge, they added. At present the light - the oldest surviving wooden lighthouse in the nation - is about 50 feet inland.

Neither Abbott nor Polselli would venture to estimate how long the lighthouse could survive ("Erosion is just too unpredictable," said Abbott) but Abbott said he hoped to resolve the matter before the federal government's 1998 fiscal year ends on Sept. 30, 1998.

The most frequently discussed alternative to moving the light involves armoring the base of the bluff with a seawall and planting vegetation above it in an attempt to stabilize it. But previous federal studies suggest that approach could cost several millions of dollars more than moving it, and those are millions that the Coast Guard does not have without specific authorization from Congress. Getting such a project designed, approved, and funded could take four or five years, Abbott said. "We don't have the luxury of that much time," he said. "We are going to have to move the light."

The lighthouse is only part of the historic complex at Gurnet Point. A fort was built on the site in 1776, and its cannons dissuaded the British Navy from trying to enter Plymouth Bay. The lighthouse was hit with a British shell during the War of 1812, but again the British Navy did not make it past the Gurnet fort's gun barrels. The fort was rebuilt at the outset of the Civil War and named Fort Andrew, and its ruins are still visible.

"There are big mounds of earth there, and in them are bunkers where the soldiers stayed," said Kathy Rizzo, a summer resident for 53 of her 57 years. "The fort is really as old as our country, and we wouldn't want a move [of the lighthouse] to cause any damage to such an historic area."

Phyllis Day, who's been coming to the Gurnet since the summer of 1937, said, "I don't think those barracks have ever been dug into by archaeologists, and they are an important part of what the Gurnet means to us. You could get into them in places when I was a girl, though it was scary."

Gurnet Point is at the elbow of a narrow peninsula that extends, like an arm with bent wrist, south and then west from the Duxbury-Marshfield line into the outer reaches of the Plymouth-Duxbury-Kingston Bay complex. Only the elbow - Gurnet - and the hand - Saquish - are inhabited. Primarily summer colonies, the two sections contain about 250 houses in all, 50 of them in the Gurnet area, of which eight are occupied year-round. One or two Saquish houses are occupied

year-round.

The roads, including the access road once it passes out of Duxbury, and almost all of the land are owned by a private property-owners' group, the Gurnet-Saquish Association, although the town of Plymouth does own some parcels, primarily in marshy areas away from the beaches.

There are no telephones or other public utilities in either Gurnet or Saquish, the roads are privately maintained, and according to Nudd, "We get snow plowing from the town only in the case of real emergencies, maybe seven times in the 18 years I've been here." Signs indicate access is limited to "Residents Only."

Nonetheless a Plymouth Selectman, Eugene Lane, has raised the issue of public access to Saquish. On Labor Day, Lane reportedly drove with-

out permission past a civilian checkpoint guard - posted at Gurnet-Saquish Association expense each summer - in a four-wheel drive vehicle and went onto the Saquish beach. When Lane returned via the checkpoint, he was met by a Plymouth police officer who told him that he was trespassing.

The association has never pressed charges in such cases, but it maintains that such restrictions are needed. "We have to restrict access to property owners and their guests because the area is extremely fragile," said Nudd. "We're loving the place to death as it is."

Lane told the weekly Old Colony Memorial, "They [the Plymouth police] violated my constitutional rights. I was still on a Plymouth private road. Even a police officer can't stop me without a reason."

Access to beaches by off-road vehicles has become a political football in Plymouth in recent years, as piping plover recovery plans have limited access to Plymouth Beach by ORVs. Lane has been among the most outspoken critics of the town's beach management efforts.

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